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It was --- a story from a time when he was still alone in the world.

"....."

"Here we go again," Hayato thought to himself. He was well aware that nothing in the world ever went the way he wanted it to. That much, he knew. But even if his brain had gotten the message, his emotions were an entirely different matter. So, he shouted.

"How long are you going to stand there looking at me with that sickening expression and that fucking sickening grin, you bastard?!"

There was a thud as a solid punch connected with the strange man standing in front of him. The force of it sent the man sprawling, and he disappeared completely from Gokudera's field of vision.

"Tch..." Hayato scoffed, and started to get up. He was lying in a rickety, dingy wooden bed with sheets that seemed to cling to his body, in a tiny room he was sure he'd never seen before.

"....." His mood was just about the worst it could have been, having woken up to realize that he had no idea where he'd just been sleeping, and on top of that, had no idea who the hell the guy looking down at him was.

"What is this place?..... Why am I in this run-down---"

"That hurt!!!"

"Wah-!?" Hayato yelped. The sudden shout had startled him and send shivers running through his body. Even worse was how creepy the whole thing was. Even though that guy'd said "That hurts!!!," he sounded downright happy about it.

"Ow! That really hurt, kid!" he continued, laughing as he said it, after Hayato had knocked him to the ground only moments before. Hayato looked at him, still lying sprawled on the floor, laughing in that obnoxiously loud voice, and felt the anger surge in his chest.

"Quit your damn laughing!" He shouted.

At that, the man abruptly stopped laughing, sitting up and staring blankly at Hayato.

"Why can't I laugh?" he asked.

"Just what part of this do you think is funny?!"

"Well, that's obvious, isn't it?" The man answered. "It's because you hurt!"

"....."

"Ah, no, I mean--!"

"You mean what?!"

"I'm just so glad you're feeling well enough to throw such a strong punch!"

".....wh-?" Hayato had a rough idea of what the guy was trying to say, but it was something that only

confused him more. Why was this guy so happy to know that a complete stranger was feeling well?

Lost in his own silence, Hayato stared at the man without thinking. If he could have described the guy in a word, it would have been to say that he was overwhelmingly dull. As for age, he looked to be in his late twenties--maybe even thirty. At any rate, to the twelve-year-old Hayato, he just looked like any other old guy. And that old man was still grinning widely, despite the fact that his face was red and swollen from Hayato's punch. No matter how you looked at it, he didn't seem like he was going to retaliate.

"....I don't get it,," He said. There was nothing he could do but ignore a guy like that.

Hayato put his hand on the edge of the bed and went to push himself up, only to find that the instant he did, bolts of pain shot through his body.

"..tch." Now he remembered.

Two days earlier, he had drifted into this moderately busy town in the valley. He'd been walking down a rather seedy looking back street, when he'd picked a fight with some guys who happened to be walking past at the same time. He hadn't really had a reason, but that wasn't unusual for him. Even in his former town he'd lived a stormy life, constantly starting one fight or another. That was the kind of life he'd led ever since he'd run away from home by himself at the age of eight.

He already had plenty of experience in some pretty bad situations, and even if they all rushed him in a group, he wasn't about to lose. He'd earned himself the nickname 'Smoking Bomb,' using dynamite so skillfully that it was like an extension of his own body. There wasn't anyone around who could stand up to him!

But then..... maybe that attitude had made him careless.

"Damn..." Hayato raised his hands to grip the most painful area of his head, and discovered that it had been wrapped in several layers of bandages. He'd been knocked unconscious... and though he didn't understand why, apparently this guy had brought him here to this house, and even gone so far as to treat his injuries. It was...

"Kid!" the man shouted, suddenly rushing forward to grab hold of him.

"Y-You--!" Hayato was having hard time reacting quickly to the crazy things this guy did, but he wasn't about to let him go on doing whatever he felt like... He swung sharply, jamming his fist into the man's stomach. A pained look spread across his face, and he loosened his grip on Hayato's arm.

"Get out of my way!" He yelled, shoving the man aside. His hand was on the doorknob, and--

"W...wait!" The man had again turned towards him, holding out a trembling hand. But, Hayato had absolutely no intention of spending one second more with him. He turned and dashed out of the room.

He could see setting sun in the gaps between buildings, and before long night had settled evenly over the entirety of the shabby little town.

"kh." Hayato walked down a sour smelling backstreet, wearing an expression of profound irritation. Part of it might have been the injuries that still ached with every step he took, but mostly it was his thoughts about the crazy old guy from before that were the source of his current state of annoyance.

(damn it.....give me a fucking break...)

He made a show of spitting loudly and violently kicked a signboard that had the misfortune to be in his line of sight, all the while ticking off as many bad words as he could think of in his head. Even then, he just couldn't seem to shake the lousy feelings.

Not to mention his surroundings, which, in stark contrast to his mood, were filled with lively light and sound. Here and there his eyes would run across a sign advertising some bar or casino, surrounded by customers out to have a good time. Their cheerful moods only worsened his growing irritation.

"Shut up!!" He shouted suddenly, causing the other people on the street to stop and stare at him in shock. But soon enough, they each returned to their own private worlds....it was as if Hayato had never been there to begin with.

"shit..."

Yeah. That was right. That's what they were. Other people were nothing but pieces of shit. He understood that so much it hurt. He'd expected the treatment when it came from 'proper' people, but even the people on the edges of that respectable world, the mafia who lived on the wrong side of society...even they hadn't accepted him. So then why----?

(Why?!..... I just don't get it!)

Some guy who just helped others without wanting anything in return was an anomaly that shouldn't have existed.....helped others without wanting----

---! Hayato's eyes went wide, and he began to frenetically check the clothes he was wearing. It was gone. It hadn't been much, but the wallet that held all of his money was gone.

"That old guy!!"

"UWAAAAAHHHH!!!"

With a loud crunch, Hayato sent the half-rotten door to the run-down apartment complex flying.

"Get the hell out here!! Don't think I'm going to let you get away with this, old man!!" His eyes were wide and bloodshot as he swept his vision over every inch of the tiny apartment., but the creepy old guy wasn't anywhere to be seen. In his place, there was one other person.

"A brat?!"

It was a kind-faced little boy of about five or six. He was staring at Hayato with his mouth agape. As for himself, Hayato was sick of surprises, and his own expression soon returned to it's customary look of icy inaccessibility.

"Hey, brat, where'd the old man go?!" He demanded.

"....you mean....dad?"

"Yeah, right, your old man! Where the hell did he go? Spit it out!"

"....." The little boy just stared at him.

The place where the boy brought him was a little bar just a ways off one of the back streets.

"Is this it?!" He shoved the boy out of the way, stormed through the door.... and gasped. It was an interior space that could hardly be imagined by looking at the bar's gloomy, stained exterior. The atmosphere had a very calm, gentle, sort of flow to it. None of the rowdy clientele so typical of bars in the slums were in evidence. Instead, the customers in the bar were all sitting quietly listening to a single sound; the sound which spun forth from the black piano in the heart of the bar.

"Ah-!"

The old man with the creepy grin was seated in front of the piano. The sincere expression he wore as he faced the keyboard made him seem like almost another person, and Hayato forgot his anger as he stood watching. Kindness...and strength. Those were the things that the sound flowing from the piano conveyed to him.

"Uh..." The sound of the entire audience breaking into applause pulled him back to reality. Realizing he'd been completely absorbed in the music, Hayato looked around as if he was trying to shake off confusion. The little boy at his side was looking up at him, smiling.

"Did you like it?"

All of a sudden, Hayato found himself unable to say anything in reply. Somehow he felt that it was some kind of admission of defeat. At any rate, he desperately needed to say som--

"Kid!" Hayato's face twitched when he heard that all-too-familiar, creepy voice.

Hayato started, whipping around hastily, only to find himself face to face with the old man. The dignity and grace he'd seemed to possess as he played the piano had disappeared completely, and he was grinning like some little kid.

"I'm so glad you're alright!"

"S-stay the hell away!" Hayato yelled, his increasing uneasiness with the situation overriding his anger as he took a step backwards. Soon enough, however, he remembered the reason he'd come here in the first place and yelled, "You bastard, what about my mone--!"

"I don't care about money !!" The man suddenly raised his own voice, and faced with that serious expression, Hayato once more found himself at a loss for words. "Are you alright? How are your injuries?"

"Huh?"

"I was worried. You left so soon after you woke up. You've got a head injury! You have to rest."

"A--" Hayato just gaped. When he'd grabbed him back at the apartment, had the old man only been trying to get him to lie down again?

"But, you really are a good kid, you know. Coming all the way over here to pay me for helping you."

"huh?"

"Yeah, we're poor! Probably too poor! Maybe the word 'destitute' isn't quite strong enough.... But, never mind! That's why, accepting a thank-you payment from a kid like you is..."

"H- Hey..."

"Something that... an adult such as myself...I mean, I couldn't think of it, no matter what you say...and I guess it might also be thought of as rude to turn you down here like this...No, I mean, I really don't want so much as even one Euro, I mean, I do want it, but, after all, no, I really don't....."

"Fucking knock it off already!!" Completely exhausted and injured though he was, Hayato's kick still made contact with the old man's face. "Who the hell said anything about giving money to some old guy like you?! You've got it backwards! You took my money, didn't you?!"

"Your money?"

"Don't play dumb with me? Who the hell else could've--"

"Maybe it was the guys who beat you up."

"Oh." He said it automatically, and his voice sounded idiotic even to him. Yeah. I mean, if he thought about it, had the guy just wanted his money he wouldn't even have had to bother taking care of him like that. But, after going this far, Hayato felt like his pride couldn't take it if he backed down.

"I don't want to hear your damn excuses! Just give me back my m---"

"Okay." was the reply. And right in front of him, the man held forth several badly crumpled notes. "I know it's not yours, but if it's acceptable--"

"....." This time Hayato was truly struck silent.

That was how he met Carlo.

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Carlo was the pianist at that small bar.

He preformed for a fee that would never be described as generous, and used the money to live a simple life with his son, Niccolo.

Ever since the incident of their first meeting, Hayato had had a regrettably inseparable relationship with Old Man Carlo. Which is to say, whenever Hayato tried to start trouble somewhere in town, Carlo would come along unasked, taking it upon himself to meddle here and there. Today was no different.

"....Kid."

"What?!"

"Kid, There's just...something I want to ask you...."

"Something you want to ask?"

"Are you... you know, one of those people? I mean.... the ones who really love being hurt... I guess it's called, 'M' or something....do, do you have that kind of....."

"As if I'd be into that stuff, you idiot!"

"Well then, why is it you always seem to end up like this, I wonder...." Smiling bitterly, Carlo gave an exasperated laugh.

Their eyes soaked in the light of the setting sun as it filtered through the narrow gaps between buildings.

Hayato and Carlo were both lying spread out, collapsed side by side on the ground of a backstreet. Both were covered in injuries, and even their clothes were tattered. It was obvious to anyone who cared to look that they'd just been in a fight.

Perhaps it could go without saying that Hayato was the root cause of the fights. Sometimes some guy bumped into his shoulder, sometimes he just didn't like the look in their eyes. Those were the kind of pretexts Hayato would hurl at the local thugs.

Hayato had been by himself, but he'd put up a good fight at first; His opponent, however, had called in one friend after another until the tide had turned, and by the time he realized it, Hayato was being attacked on from all sides. That was when Carlo had shown up.

He'd thrown himself between them, trying to save Hayato, but in the end they'd just wound up getting beaten up together.

""Hey, look... If we're asking questions, I'm the one who ought to be asking you!"

"Asking me? Ha ha.....you don't have to be shy."

"Who's being shy?! Look, why...why do you keep doing all this unnecessary stuff?"

"Unnecessary? What is?"

"Everything! Getting yourself beat up like this....are you stupid or something?!"

"But... that's because it always seems like you want me to help you....."

"Wh- What the hell?! When did I ever say anything like that?!"

"You're saying it, aren't you.....? Your eyes are always saying, 'help me,' kid."

Hayato didn't know why, but he couldn't think of anything to say to that. And, his face was so becoming so hot he couldn't stand it.

".....tch.....idiot...."

Somehow muttering that was all he could manage, and he turned his face away. As he sat with his back to Carlo, he pushed back the pain and tried to rouse his body. Considering how badly he'd been punched and kicked, he wasn't actually all that badly injured. But,

"gh..." Hayato turned when he heard a pained sound. There was Carlo, covered in sweat and tightly clutching his right wrist.

"Hey..."

"Ah.... I'm fine. I occasionally have some problems with my athlete's foot, but...."

"As if you'd be holding your wrist like that for athlete's foot, idiot!" Hayato came closer to Carlo, taking hold of his arm.

"tch..." Carlos grimaced in pain, and a single look at his red and swollen wrist made it clear that this was no minor injury.

"...of all the... What the hell did you think you were doing....?" Hayato couldn't help but feel irritated as he slung Carlo's arm around his shoulder and started walking.

It would take two weeks for a complete recovery. That was the verdict handed down to Carlo by the doctor. As suspected, the injuries to his right wrist was the worst of it. To Carlo, at least, in some ways you could have called it a fatal injury.

If he couldn't move his hand, he couldn't play the piano.

That is to say, for Carlo, who's only source of income had been the piano performances at that small bar, this was undoubtedly a tight spot to be in.

"....damn it....you've got to be fucking kidding me! You really must be stupid...." Hayato cursed to himself as he walked through the town. He couldn't help but get angry every time he thought about Carlo. He just couldn't understand what the hell that old man was thinking. There had to be a limit to that kind of kindness, didn't there?

According to what he'd heard---or rather, according to the life story that Carlo had started telling him, unsolicited---it seemed like Carlo'd been trying to become a professional pianist, performing worldwide. But none of the seeds he'd planted had come to fruition, and though he'd married, his wife had died as well, so that now he was living a life of poverty with the only family he had left in the world, his son.

(Damn it, it's not exactly the kind of situation where you should be trying to help others....)

At any rate, Hayato couldn't take it anymore. Goody-two-shoes or not, he wasn't about to allow himself to be in debt to anyone.

"....."

He'd stopped in front of the bar where Carlo played piano every night. Right now, the sun hadn't finished setting, and the bar was still closed.

He stood in front of the bar looking lost. He meandered back and forth, coming close to the door he didn't know how many times, before---

"Goddamn it!!!"

He flung the door open as hard as he could.

In the half-light of the store, there was no one to be seen, and the room was filled with dead silence. Hayato's eyes settled on the piano in the center of the bar. It had been one week since Carlo was injured. In that time, it looked like the piano had gone unplayed, and a thin layer of dust had settled on it.

"....."

Hayato stared at the piano.

In his mind he could see Carlo sitting there, the pathetic look he usually wore supplanted by a serious expression as his fingers flew across the keys. And....in his far off memories, a hazy image of a familiar woman---

"Can you play the piano?"

"--!"

He spun around in surprise, and there was Niccolo, Carlo's son, standing beside him. Hayato realized then, that without realizing it, he had drawn closer to the piano and was tracing the ivory with a slender finger.

"L-- Like I'd know how to do something like that!!!"

It was a lie. When he was a small child he had given piano performances in front of many, many people.

But, to Hayato, those were certainly not what he would consider pleasant memories.

"I just...."

"Just?"

"Just... it's that... I mean... It's nothing!" He shouted violently, looking away from Niccolo.

He'd just wanted to see what he could do for the store, anything, if he could just be allowed to work in place of the injured Carlo--It was embarrassing, and there was no way he could say something like that out loud.

And, even having gone this far, Hayato found himself slipping back into a selfish mindset.

He didn't know if it was momentary insanity or what, but going out of his way to do something for someone else.... What had he been thinking? The old man had jumped into the fight of his own accord, and gotten injured of his own accord as well, nothing more. Hayato was under absolutely no obligation whatsoever to do anything to help him.

Hayato shook his head slightly and went to leave the store.

"I can play it." Niccolo had changed places with Hayato and was sitting in front of the piano.

"Huh? You?!"

Seeing the incredulous look on Hayato's face, Niccolo frowned and puffed out his cheeks in indignation.

"I can play. Dad taught me."

---his dad taught him.

Hayato felt like those words had pierced his heart.

"Listen."

Niccolo placed both hands on the keys. "...uh"

With his small hands, Niccolo grappled as hard as he could with the large keyboard. But, as Hayato had predicted, his performance was still very much on the level of child's-play.

Hayato spoke without thinking. "Hey, brat."

".....?"

"It's not about just hitting the keys as hard as you can..."

Niccolo tilted his head. "Like this?"

"No, not like that! You haven't even changed anything at all!"

"Then, like this?"

"No, like I keep saying, you're just pounding the keys in exactly the same way as before. You need more, you know, rhythm... I mean, strength, I mean..."

".....???"

"Oh, just... move." Hayato picked up Niccolo and set him off to the side, seating himself in front of the piano instead.

"First, just listen carefully. The explanation starts after that."

Niccolo nodded meekly and shut his eyes tight.

"Ready? This is what you were playing earlier." With that, Hayato stretched out his hands towards the keyboard---

"....."

His fingers stopped just before they could touch the keys.

He could feel the faint trembling in his fingers, and before long the shaking had spread to his whole body.

".....damn it."

Hayato scoffed and covered his face with his hands. It had happened again...

Once again he'd gotten carried away by this kid and his father, and gone and tried to do something unthinkable.

".....?"

Likely figuring it was strange he hadn't heard anything after listening for so long, Niccolo had opened his eyes and was looking at Hayato.

"What's wrong?"

".....Nothing."

Hayato gave an exhausted sigh and stood up from the piano bench. At any rate, getting the hell out of here was his

first priority.

But,

"Carlo?" The voice had been directed at Hayato. "It's been a while since I've seen you around, how's your injury?"

The man standing in the entrance, smiling at Niccolo was a dignified looking elderly man with an elegant looking moustache.

"Oh! You're color's certainly improved, and you almost look like you've gotten younger..... It's almost like you're a different person or something...."

"Because I AM a different person!" said Hayato, turning to face the old man, letting his anger out in his voice. "Hey, Gramps! What the hell made you think I was that old guy?!"

"Huh...?"

With that it seemed that realization had finally dawned in the old man's eyes.

"Ah, I'm terribly sorry. It's just that Carlo is always the one who sits in front of that piano, so, I...."

" 'So, you,' nothing! Damn it, ..."

The man sighed. ".... So, I guess Carlo hasn't been able to come back yet. And listening to his performances was one of the few pleasures of my old age..."

"Don't worry, Grandpa! Hayato says he'll play for us!"

"Really? Well, I'm very glad to hear that, Niccolo."

"Yeah!"

".....Hey!!!" Hayato interjected himself into their happy conversation. "What makes you think I'll do something like that?!"

" But... you said you'd let me listen...."

"Idio--- That was just because your playing sucked so much, so I had to ..."

"That's great, isn't it Niccolo?"

"Yeah!"

"I'm telling you, I'm not going to play!!!!"

If he kept wasting time here like this, Hayato was going to wind up getting sucked in by the strange pace of things. He quickly slipped around the side of Niccolo and the old man, and made a beeline for the exit.

"Geh!"

Just as he tried to exit, he found his way blocked by a couple of men, customers who were just entering the store.

"Who's the kid?"

"You're not going to get any of your mommy's milk here ,"

"What?! Just who do you bastards think you're messing with? I'll wreck this whole miserable bar!"

"Hey, hey, please, now. That boy is the pianist who's going to perform in Carlo's place!"

"Ehh, really?"

"That's good to know. It's been pretty lonely around here without Carlo..."

"Don't get all excited or anything!!! I never said I'd do anything like...."

"Geez, what's the yelling about?"

"It's this kid."

I was just about opening time, and new customers were gradually pouring through the entrance. Pushed back by the wave of people, Hayato once more found himself standing in front of the piano.

"Uh...." All eyes in the store were fixed on him and the piano. He desperately wracked his mind to find some sort of way out of the situation, but nothing came to him at all.

"....." He just stood there. Under the weight of all the stares he felt his heart start to pound rapidly and his face grow hot. But---strangely---it wasn't an unpleasant feeling at all. Every gaze felt so... sincerely expectant. None of them were like the looks that were directed at him from street corners, looking at him like he was in the way. And somehow that was....very...

"....damn." Hayato scratched his head. From deep in his heart, a hazy feeling of regret and frustration was bubbling upward. Why was it he only ever thought about running away? Why should he run away from the brat or this geezer or the old man?!

".....fine, let's do this," he muttered, resolution hardening in his eyes, before sitting down in front of the piano. Immediately, the surrounding room broke into cheers and whistles. "Here goes..."

But, in the instant he'd been about to set his fingers to the keyboard, the very same trembling from before returned. "Tch... this..."

He clenched his teeth, desperately willing the shaking in his fingers to stop. Everyone in the store was looking at him quietly. It was a strange kind of unity of feeling, almost as if they were watching over a small child try to stand for the first time.

"....." It stopped. Like a wave receding, the trembling subsided. And, Hayato touched his slender fingers to the snow white keys of the piano.

Slowly.....a delicate and refined melody began to flow.

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He'd always felt it.

That was why he hadn't been about to stop.

"Don't go, Hayato!" His sister's voice on the night he ran away from home still rang in his ears, even now. If she'd felt like it, she could have stopped him by force. It would've been easy for her. But she didn't.

"As if I'd ever stay in a place like this, a place...!" He'd turned and flung those words at her. "A place that killed my mother!!!" Then he ran, without looking back.

He was afraid.

Afraid of what, he didn't really know, but...

He could feel it, the fact that with his words he'd shattered something for good.

"Hayato---!" His sister's grief-stricken scream was the one thing that always followed him, no matter where he went. No matter where he went...No matter where he went....

"Oh, you're awake."

He opened his eyes to see Niccolo's face, smiling the same naïve smile that his father always wore.

Hayato remembered aimlessly heading over to Carlo's place earlier in the day, and accidentally falling asleep in the afternoon because of the weather.

"It's already evening. The store's gonna open!"

"Huh? What's that got to do with me?" Hayato muttered sullenly.

He wasn't sure if his sour mood was due to the fact he'd been woken up in the middle of his nap, or caused by the sharp pain in his stomach.

A long time ago, his sister, who was three years older than him, had forced him to eat the strange food she made. Ever since, the trauma of it had been carved into him to the point that just seeing her face was enough to trigger it.

(So this happens even when I only see her face in a dream? ...Damn it...)

He'd lived with his sister until he was eight. When he ran away from home, she'd been the only one who'd cared enough to try to stop him, all the way to the end.

".....tch."

In an effort to forget the dream Hayato suddenly roused himself, getting up from the shabby sofa in Carlo's house.

The same group of run-down group of customers had gathered over at the run-down little bar.

"Oh, it's you, kid."

"I see you've still got that scowl, same as ever, kid."

"Shut up! And don't fucking go around calling other people 'kid,' 'kid,' all the time!" No matter how menacing his glare was, the only response was warm laughter.

"...damn..." grumbling, he sat down in an empty seat. It was just about time for Carlo to begin playing. Carlo's injured right wrist had healed nicely, and he'd been able to resume his performances at the bar a few days earlier.

Hayato rested his chin on his hand and listened to Carlo's performance.

"....."

----it felt...nostalgic.

The memories bubbled up from deep inside of him. Memories from long, long before he'd met Carlo. This was a completely different song, and a completely different person was playing it, but still it called to life the melody sleeping deep in his mind.

"Kid."

He lifted his face as if he'd been woken from a dream. It seemed the performance had come to an end sometime earlier, and Carlo was sitting across from him, wearing his usual naïve smile.

"What did you think, Kid?"

"Like I keep saying, just how many goddamn times do I have to tell you to stop calling me 'kid'?! Everyone else here copies you and I've got to deal with 'kid, kid' all the time...."

"Then, how about 'young adult'?"

" 'then,' nothing!"

"Come to think of it though, I don't know your name yet, kid. Ha ha..." Carlos smiled wryly, scratching his nose.

"Well, I guess it's not that important..."

"It damn well is!"

"Actually, kid, I've been wanting to thank you properly." Carlo leaned forward and took Hayato's hand. "Thank you, very much."

"Wh-What... I don't remember being told any..."

"Ha ha, shy as always, aren't you?"

"...! A-are you mocking me you bastard?!" without thinking, Hayato got angry.

In front of his eyes, Carlo quickly produced and held out a small box.

"...What's that supposed to be?"

"It's a token of my gratitude. For playing the piano in my place while I was gone."

Hayato felt his face turn red.

"A--As if! It's not like I was doing it for you or anything! That just, you know.... happened...like..."

"But, you weren't very popular, after all--- The shopmaster even said that he got fewer customers."

"Wha--?!"

"But, don't let that bother you. I'll work hard from here on to win back the customers that got away while you were here. You did as well as an amateur could and, well, what's done is done, so...."

"...! Hey! What the hell kind of follow-up is that?!" When Hayato pounded his fist on the table, the small box caught

his eye, and he looked at it with interest.

"...and? What's in this thing anyway?"

"My treasure. The only tape of it's kind in the world."

" 'tape' ... as in music? So, it's a recent tape, then?"

"It's an illusive performance, secretly recorded five years ago. At that time, I think he was seven years old. At any rate, he was an amazing child. His name was....

....Hayato Gokudera."

In that instant---

Hayato's breathing stopped completely.

"I can't forget, even now. It was an avant-garde performance that completely transcended the traditional style. Even while seeming to be confused or jumbled, it had a mysterious sense of unity that could pull you in. It was a magnificent performance that no one else could duplicate."

"....."

"However, after that.... I'm not sure why, but it seems like he stopped appearing. I wonder if something happened...? I'm sure that he'd give an even more magnificent performance, now that he's grown a bit."

"....."

"You know, to be honest... Lately when I look at you, I kind of think you look like that Hayato kid. And I was thinking this was maybe like some kind of destiny, you know...and...what are you doing?"

Hayato had fallen forward over the table and was shaking slightly. Carlo looked at him blankly, cocking his neck in puzzlement.

"...You didn't hurt yourself again, did you? I'd heard you'd stopped getting into fights lately so I was relieved, but..."

"SHUT UP!!!" Hayato screamed suddenly.

Not only Carlo, but everyone around them turned their heads to look.

"...kid?"

Hayato had raised his face, his teeth clenched tight together. It looked as if he was struggling with all his might to bear some kind of pain which was surging through him, and...

Suddenly all the strength left his tensed body. Hayato heaved a small sigh, and stood up from his seat.

"Goodbye," He said, and without meeting anyone's eyes, he turned and left the shop.

And he didn't return, ever again.

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Аmano Акира • Amano Akira (eIDLIVE • Reborn!)4/

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A month had passed since he'd left Carlo's town.

He'd wandered into another town, and once more began to live a stormy life. He hadn't felt anything in particular about that. It was just going back to the way things had been. He was just acting like himself, living in a world for people like him.

"You're the Smoking Bomb, aren't you?"

That day, some guys in black had come looking for Hayato. One look gave him the distinct impression that these weren't exactly honorable opponents.

"What do you want?" Hayato reached for the dynamite concealed in his pocket.

The men held out their hands as if to say they bore him no hostility.

"Nice to meet you. We are the Grijo, the Family that runs this area."

"So you're mafia, huh?" Hayato said, his expression turning grim.

In order to get by living on the wrong side of society, he'd tried so many times to join the mafia.

But, the answers had always been cold. It didn't matter what family, they all refused to take on a child like him. When that happened, Hayato's rage and frustration would grow, and as his life became even stormier, the attitude the Mafia held towards him would get even colder; There had been times he'd been forcibly run off, for being a nuisance who'd wreck their turf.

"Hey, hey. Don't make such a menacing face. Your reputation has preceded you."

"So like I said, what the hell do you want?!"

"We would like you to join our Family."

Those words had certainly been... unexpected.

You...You want me?" He'd answered without thinking, hastily returning to rigid expression.

"D-Don't fuck with me! What the hell is this, all of a sud--"

"In return, we'd like you do just one job for us."

--Ah. There it was. He'd thought it would be something like that. There'd be no way they'd just let him in for free; great deals like that didn't happen. In this world, it was all a question of whether you'd be the one using or the one being used.

"...and?"

Hayato looked at the men called Grijo, glaring at the one who's teeth stuck out, without letting his guard down.

"...the hell. Just what is this 'job' you want me to do, anyway?"

"Have you decided to take us up on our offer? Then, the matter will be much simpler, and you'll find it works out much better for you as well."

Grigo chuckled in a small voice "Heeheehee..." Hayato had seen that expression before, and it looked exactly like the rats which could be seen all over these backstreets.

"Don't get the wrong idea. Whether I do the job or not depends on you."

"My. You certainly think highly of yourself, Smoking Bomb." Grijo moved closer to Hayato's face, tilting his head forward and looking up from under his brow.

"But, that's what I like about you. It's no wonder, being on your own on the wrong side of society ever since you were little."

"....."

"I'm an excellent judge people. I heard about your skill with dynamite and though we might want to scout you, but after meeting you in person, I'm even more interested. Since it's you, I'm sure..."

"Enough already, just tell me what you want! I don't need your bullshit platitudes"

"Smoking Bomb." Grigo suddenly grabbed his hand.

Fixed with that unwaveringly serious expression, Hayato unconsciously took a breath.

"Our enemies are an old presence in this town."

He didn't know what he was trying to say. But, he found himself getting pulled in by the passionate way that he was speaking.

"The old are what causes society to rot. Their traditions and conventions and other illogical ways of thinking cause them to reject the new, one after another. You've experienced that as well, haven't you?"

"Eh...?"

"You've tried to join the Mafia time and again, and every time they rejected you. Maybe they said it was because you were part Japanese, maybe they said it was because they didn't need the kind of weakling who played the piano-- they did it for pathetic reasons like that.

"....."

"But, our Family is different! We aren't so bound by tradition that we'd turn away a powerful guy. Yeah...In fact, we need young people like you! So..."

"L-Let me go!"

Hayato yanked away the hand that Grijo had been holding, and turned away.

"L-like I said...What do you want?Suddenly saying That kind of...."

"Our goals are the same. In order to survive we must defeat the old ones who deny us. Don't you agree?"

Grijo took Hayato's hand again

"....." Hayato didn't pull away.

The job was easier than he'd thought it'd be.

He was to place a time bomb in a certain concert hall. That's all he knew. The goal was to get the attention of a hostile Mafia.

The concert which would take place there tomorrow was being sponsored by the enemy mafia boss, and ruining it would cause him to lose face.

In their eyes, that would be the most effective method. Cause him shame and make him lose his cool. Were that to

happen, there would be any number of opportunities they could take advantage of.

Grijo had said this with an air of pride, but honestly, Hayato couldn't think of this as anything more than a petty errand.

But...With this, he'd finally be able to become a member of the Mafia.

It was what he'd yearned for, for so very long---The Mafia, heroes of Italy's wrong side of society.

After this, there'd be no end to big jobs. He at least had enough skill to carry them out successfully. Imagining his future self, striding quickly with his men following along behind, Hayato felt, for the first time in a long time, a smile spread across his face.

Then,

"Big brother?"

Hayato turned at the sound of a familiar voice. What he saw was a person who shouldn't have been there.

"Niccolo..."

"It really is you...big brother."

Niccolo broke into a small run and flung his arms around Hayato's legs squeezing tightly.

He found himself completely unable to say anything in the face of the unexpected reunion, and soon Niccolo was looking up at him with face that was near tears.

"Why did you go away?"

"uh....."

"Why?"

There wasn't even a hint of uncertainty, just eyes that said he was worried about Hayato from the bottom of his heart.

"Big brother."

The trembling in his small hands caused Hayato's body to shake as well.

Gradually, Hayato's face became more and more twisted into a pained expression, and...

"Shut up!"

At the sudden yelling, the hands gripping his legs suddenly released him. Niccolo backed away, unsteadily and sank back onto the ground.

"Big...brother...."

Turning his back on the voice, shaking with tears, Hayato started to run.

There'd be no turning back---

With that determination, he bit down hard on his lip.

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When he came to, the smell of the kitchen waste that was strewn over the street filled his nose. He felt terrible.
"...damn..."

He braced against a nearby wall, and somehow got himself to his feet. He'd spent last night going around to every bar on the back streets, until he'd collapsed. He'd used all the money Grijo had given him as an advance, and gone out to have a good time at every place possible.

But, it hadn't changed anything.

"....."

He squinted against the brightness and looked at the sky.

It looked as if the sun had already passed its highest point, and was now slowly beginning to sink.
It wouldn't be much longer---

This evening, there would be a performance at that concert hall. Soon after it began, the dynamite that Hayato had placed would go off. It wasn't as if it would be a big explosion, but it ought to be more than enough to plunge the hall into panic.

With this, Hayato could become a part of the Mafia.

Even so--For some reason, Hayato couldn't feel even so much as a twinge of happiness.
Ever since yesterday, when he met Niccolo, everything felt wrong.
"Damn it...what the hell!..."

Clutching his throbbing head, Hayato started to walk, with no particular destination in mind.
"--!!"

Screeeeeeeeeeeech!!

Walking unsteadily along the street, Hayato heard the sound of brakes as an expensive looking car came to a halt in front of him.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're---"

It was abundantly clear that it had been his own fault for walking out without looking, but Hayato yelled anyway, as if it didn't matter. Whatever. Anything was fine. As long as he could find someone to take this anger out on.

But, the person who emerged from the backseat of the car was--

"Gramps!"

It was the refined-looking old man who'd been a regular customer at the bar.

"Oh, is that you, Kid? It's been a long time!"

"-! Hey! Don't call me that!" Redfaced, without thinking he yelled in anger. But, oddly enough, he didn't feel as bad as his shouting would indicate.

"It's so strange to run into you in a place like this," the old man said, before clapping his hands together as though he'd suddenly remembered something. "Oh, I see! You also came to listen, right?"

"Huh? Listen...?"

"To Carlo's concert, of course!"

He stopped. In that one instant, Hayato froze completely. A concert-----In this town, there was only one place you could do something like that. That was.....the place where Hayato had placed dynamite..... -----

"....that can't be.....true....."

"It is! Someone came forward who wanted to back him, and because of that he's now able to perform a concert in a large town like this. Not just me, but many other people from the store have come to hear"

Hayato wasn't listening.

He couldn't think.

"Ah, Kid...," the old man called out, turning towards Hayato, who'd begun to walk aimlessly. "What do you say? If you like, we can go together in my c...."

Hayato was running before he'd had a chance to finish saying the word.

He didn't remember how or where he'd run. When he came to his senses he was sitting on a small beach on the outskirts of town, looking at the sea.

"....."

The color of the sun filling his vision slowly brought him back to himself. Little by little the blue sky was turning to red.

It wouldn't be long now. It wouldn't be long before.....before the dynamite he'd set.....

"Kid."

"I"

He thought his heart was going to leap out of his chest.

The old man was standing right behind him.

"Why don't we leave off the detours and go to Carlo's concert?" The old man clapped a hand on Hayato's back as he spoke.

"....hell.."

He couldn't keep the shaking out of his voice. Even when he tried to, it wouldn't stop. And even though he tried to hold them back, his words overflowed and came spilling out of his mouth.

"As if I could go... as if someone like me could... how could I go and show my face to them...I..."

"Kid."

The old man dropped to his knees in front of him, and gently placed his hands on Hayato's shaking shoulders.

"I'm sure they'll be happy to see you. Carlo and Niccolo both."

"Happy to see the guy who went and blew up his long awaited concert?"

The smile disappeared from the old man's face in the space of an instant.

"What....do you mean by that?"

"Nothing!" Shouting, Hayato brushed aside the old man's hands and stood up. "I don't know why you guys seem to

have gotten the wrong impression, but this is the real me! The Smoking Bomb, a nuisance who can't find an inn to take him no matter where he goes! That's who I am!"

That's right. He'd known it from the beginning.

He was the kind of person who'd never had the right to stay with Carlo. He was not, had never been, the kind of person Carlo thought him to be. Receiving that tape, he'd finally been able to build enough willpower to leave. To think that that performance had survived on a tape---and that Carlo had been a big fan of it.

When he found out, he'd understood completely what a disappointment he'd be. That was why Hayato----

"I don't give a damn what happens to anyone else! As long as everything's fine with me, then everything's fine! You guys...."

His voice had started shaking again.

"Y....You guys....you...guys....."

"....."

Wordlessly, he began to shout.

As Hayato clutched his head, screaming, the old man looked on quietly.

And then,

"--!"

The old man took his arm.

"Wh-what are you--"

"I'll hear the whole story later. We don't have much time, right?"

"Gh-!let go of me, Gramps!" He flailed, trying to wrench free from the old man's grasp. But the thin fingers gripping his arm didn't so much as flinch.

"You--! Let go!!!" He yelled, and resisted with all his strength. It was unbelievable, but the old man, who was shorter than Hayato, seemed to be having no trouble pulling him along behind.

"You old bastard!! Where do you think you're taking me?!"

"It's obvious isn't it. We're going to where Carlo is."

"!!!"

"Carlo has been wanting to see you very much. He's said he was able to change because he met you. "

"....what the..."

"That's what he said. That you were someone he needed."

"Don't mess with me, what did I ever do for that old---"

"You listened to him play."

"!"

"He wants so much for you to listen to his performance. He's said you're the first person he's met outside his family that he's felt so strongly about. Though, it seems he doesn't quite know why, himself. But, because he was able to meet you, he felt he'd become able to create a wonderful performance."

"What...what's..."

"Kid."

He suddenly pulled Hayato towards him, grabbing his face with both hands.

"Listen, Kid. The one who decides the future is the person you are right now. Not the person you were in the past. "

"....."

"And the person standing in front of me right now isn't someone who is hated, or anything like that. He's someone who can feel sadness and shed tears when other people get hurt --- He's a kid with a kind heart."

Hayato couldn't respond to that. The old man's eyes looked like a clear sky, and he couldn't tear his gaze away.

All his excuses, all the acting tough ---- It was as if all of the lies he was holding inside were taken in by those eyes.

"Let's go, Kid."

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